

Top Ten Mothers in the Bible

Long before we ever began to celebrate Mother's Day on the second Sunday of May each year, mothers were storied and honored in the Bible. Some would find that surprising since most ancient societies were patriarchal and male-oriented. Actually it is quite amazing that the Bible honors women and especially mothers long before it was the socially acceptable thing to do.

Of all the mothers whose stories are recorded in the Bible, I want to tell you about ten.

Eve is the first woman in the Bible and her story is famous. God created the universe, the earth, animals and two humans. God named the man Adam; Adam named his wife Eve. Adam and Eve had a marriage that was made in heaven and was lived out in paradise. But paradise was lost when this first couple succumbed to a temptation to sin that was offered by Satan. They sinned against God and contaminated not only their own lives but the rest of the human race. Although Adam was equally guilty, Eve has gotten more of the blame.

If you asked her husband what she should be remembered for he would not mention a snake or forbidden fruit. Adam wanted Eve to be remembered for being a mom. In fact, the first time her name is mentioned in the Bible is in a quote from Adam in Genesis 3:20: *"Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living."*

Scholars have debated for centuries exactly what the name Eve means and how that connects to being a mother. But, regardless of the etymology, what made this woman famous was her motherhood.

Modern mothers need to learn from the Bible's lesson about Eve. Whether you make small mistakes or great mistakes, what you are most remembered for is being a mother who impacts the lives of others.

Second in our list of mothers is Sarah. Sarah lived generations after Eve. She was a truly amazing woman. Let me tell you some of what we know about her.

Sarah was absolutely gorgeous. The Pharaoh of Egypt wanted to recruit her for his harem, as did another king named Abimelech. She was adventurous. She was a pioneer who left her home country and moved to another country and began all over again, leaving everybody she knew behind. She became rich and extremely powerful. She was a model wife who is celebrated in the New Testament in 1 Peter 3:6 as one of the best examples of what a wife is supposed to be like. And she was infertile. The one dream of her life was to become a mother, and she couldn't do it. She lived a long life of 127 years.

God promised Sarah a miracle. When she was 90 years old God announced that she would bear a son. She laughed out loud. Retirement homes don't have nurseries and Medicare doesn't cover pregnancy. Besides, her husband Abraham was 99 years old. He would be 118 when the child graduated from high school. It was way too old.

But God got the last laugh. The child was born exactly as God had predicted. And they named him Isaac, which means "laughter." Sarah learned a lesson for every

mother to learn, and that is that God does the impossible. God actually performs miracles.

Number Three on the list of the Bible's top ten mothers is actually a quartet—the four wives of Jacob. Their names were Leah, Bilhah, Zilpah and Rachel.

Polygamy in the Bible was rare and clearly outside of God's plan and design. Frankly, it is not a pretty picture. Jacob loved and wanted to marry Rachel. In those days women wore veils that covered their faces, so Rachel's father switched brides at the wedding. It wasn't until the next morning after the wedding night that Jacob found out he had actually married the ugly older sister Leah. Having been tricked, he still wanted to marry prettier Rachel, so he married her as well. Married life was not off to a good start. He was married to two sisters who were competitive in their relationship with their husband to the point that they insisted that their maids have children by their husband. So Jacob got

God has not forgotten those who hurt deeply?

two more wives named Bilhah and Zilpah. It was a mess with jealousy, intrigue, insult and slavery.

These four women bore twelve sons and a daughter. It was the beginning of a nation that continues until today. God renamed the father, Jacob, and changed his name to Israel. The sons multiplied into the twelve tribes of Israel. They became one of the greatest nations and one of the few ancient peoples to survive to modern times.

These four mothers taught us all about the good God can bring out of the messes we make.

Rahab would not be an easy mom to find a Mother's Day card for at Target or Hallmark. She was a prostitute. As much as prostitution has been idealized by modern myths and movies, the truth is that it is a dreadful and a demeaning way of life.

Charleen and I visited missionaries ministering in the Red Light District of Calcutta, India. We walked the streets of an area about the size of the Wooddale Church campus where 6000 prostitutes line the streets each night. They have been sold by their families because they needed money or were kidnapped or were forced into the trade. They earn as little as 50 cents a day, barely enough to provide a meal for themselves and their children. It is the kind of life that I imagine Rahab lived in the Middle Eastern city of Jericho.

Rahab was not Jewish but she came to believe in the God of the Hebrew people of the Old Testament. She escaped her profession, became a mother and raised her family in her adopted nation of Israel. Her son's name was Boaz, her grandson was Obed, her great-grandson was Jesse and her great-great grandson was David, King of Israel. Her most famous direct descendant was Jesus of Nazareth.

Rahab taught us that God changes people and that the least likely person can become a marvelous mother influencing for good generations to come.

Naomi was a very traditional mother. She had a nice Jewish wedding to a good Jewish man named Elimelech in a nice little Jewish community called Bethlehem. God blessed them with two fine sons named Mahlon and Kilion. Life was about as good as it gets.

And then life turned bad. There was a famine. Her husband Elimelech lost his job. In desperation, looking for employment, they moved away from home and out of their own country to a place called

Moab in search of a job. Her husband died, leaving her a widow in a foreign country with two sons. She did her best but was heartbroken when they both chose pagan wives to marry. Then her sons died. She had no husband, no sons, no grandchildren, no reason to live. So she officially changed her name to Mara which means "bitter." She had lost everything and she was too old to start all over again.

Naomi's story is not unique. She belongs to a large sisterhood of mothers who have lost children they loved. There are no words to describe the loss. There are no remedies to fully heal the soul. There is no later joy to fill the void of lost children. There are no Mother's Day flowers for those whose children have died. There would be no Sarah-like miracle for her; no surprise pregnancy in old age. She would never have children again.

Naomi had done absolutely everything right and it had all turned out terribly wrong. But she did not stay bitter. She is Number Five on our list of the Top Ten Moms of the Bible, but to get the rest of her story we need to go on to Number Six, and that is Ruth.

Ruth was Naomi's daughter-in-law. For her life was equally bad. She also was a widow, although a much younger widow. She also had no children. She had never had a child to love and lose. She never had a child at all. And it seemed unlikely that she ever would.

But then something amazing happened. Ruth asked her mother-in-law to take her along with her back to Israel. She wanted to convert from a pagan Moabite to a believer in God. Why would she do that? Why not send her mother-in-law, who was so bitterly depressed, back to the land from which she came? Why did she want to be like her? Because Ruth saw in Naomi, in the midst of her grief and bitterness, a God who was powerful . . . and she wanted that God.

Sometimes we think that when we are at our very worst there isn't anything attractive about us and certainly no evidence that God is there. But it was far to the contrary. God's power and presence showed through anyway. It is like the words of Jesus recorded in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*"

Ruth and Naomi walked all the way back to the little village of Bethlehem and went on welfare because there were no jobs and there was no money. It was while they were on welfare that Ruth met and married a relative of Naomi named Boaz. She bore to him a son named Obed who became the adopted grandson of Naomi. Naomi helped raise Obed who became the grandfather of King David. As she was raising this adopted grandchild, Mara changed her name back to Naomi which means “delight”.

Naomi belongs in the Mothers’ Hall of Fame for faithfulness to God in the midst of hardship and heartbreak.

Ruth is the converted pagan who became a mother in Israel and after whom one of the books of the Bible is named.

Number seven is Hannah.

She was a good woman with a good husband named Elkanah. And she was infertile. Infertility was a difficult burden for a woman to bear back then. It was considered to be a curse from God. And, to make things even worse, Hannah was continually criticized and tormented by another woman named Peninnah because she had children and Hannah did not.

Infertility can be a heavy burden in any culture or generation because it is all about unfulfilled dreams. It’s about the way life was supposed to be. It is everything that was imagined that somehow has not come true. It touches the deepest of human instincts. It’s all about future generations that will never be.

Hannah passionately pleaded with God and totally trusted him. She went to the Temple in Shiloh and it was there that she pleaded her case before God. She prayed so passionately that Eli the priest concluded that she was drunk. In fact, he censored her for coming to the Temple when she was in a drunken state. She explained that she wasn’t drunk, that she had a heavy heart and was pleading with God to intervene. Hannah trusted God to make a difference in her life. She asked God to give to her a son and promised God that if her prayer was answered she would return him to God for the rest of his life.

Blessed are those mothers who want their children to be close to Jesus.

God said “yes”. She gave birth to a son and named him Samuel. When he was still a young boy she took him to the Temple at Shiloh and gave him to God. She left him there to be raised by the priests, visiting him only once a year. Samuel grew up to become one of the greatest prophets and leaders in the entire Bible.

Hannah wanted to be a mother. She totally trusted God. She even trusted God enough to give up her son.

Number Eight is the most famous mother of all. More girls are named after Mary than after any other woman in all of history. God picked her from the lineup of all the women of history to be the mother of his Son.

The Christmas story in Luke 1:26-28 says:

... God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

What astonishing words for God’s head angel to speak to a teenage girl, to tell her that she was highly favored and would give birth to the Son of God!

There is a sketch by Frederick Buechner that depicts the angel Gabriel talking to Mary, his hands behind his back and his fingers crossed. It must have seemed astonishing even to an angel . . . that God would trust Mary with his Son! But, that is exactly what God did. God trusted Mary.

And, that is what God does with every mother. He trusts her with the life of a daughter or a son.

Number nine is the saddest story on the list. It is the mothers of Bethlehem. They are actually part of the Christmas story, the part we seldom tell. For when King Herod heard that a king had been born in Bethlehem, he told his soldiers to kill every baby boy under the age of two. It was an act of despicable cruelty. Those babies died and the hearts of their mothers were indescribably wounded.

In Matthew 2:18 the historian Matthew quoted the poetry of Jeremiah to capture the pain of a mother *“weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more.”*

Some of the top mothers of the Bible are those who were very good moms, who did everything right, and who loved and lost. This is also the story of a long line of those for whom Mother’s Day is not an easy celebration. Isn’t it interesting, amazing and wonderful that God has not forgotten those who hurt deeply? Even though it painfully interrupts the story of Christmas, God insisted that the story be told so that those mothers would not be forgotten. They are acknowledged and honored by God, and they must be acknowledged and honored by us.

Last on this Top Ten List is Mrs. Zebedee. Some people would say she does not deserve to be on the list at all because of her behavior. Mrs. Zebedee did something for which she has been criticized now for two thousand years. One day she went to Jesus and asked a personal favor. She knelt down and asked Jesus to appoint her two sons to the top spots in heaven. She said in Matthew 20:21, *“Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”*

What about all the others? Why should her sons get this kind of preferential treatment? So, she has been criticized ever since. But I don’t see her that way. I see her request differently. I see her as a

mother who wanted more than anything else that her children be as close to Jesus Christ as they could possibly get. And she was willing to get down on her knees and beg if that would help. That was not a bad thing but a good thing.

Mrs. Zebedee is the kind of woman that I would put on every list of top moms. Blessed are those mothers who want their children to be close to Jesus.

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